

US regulator approves re-certification flights for Boeing's deadly 737 Max

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Aerospace manufacturer Boeing and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) yesterday conducted the first of a series of certification test flights for the grounded 737 Max aircraft. The rest of the test flights are expected to occur throughout the week and are considered a critical step in the ultimate re-certification of the aircraft. One of the main goals of these flights will be to “evaluate Boeing’s proposed changes to the automated flight control system,” according to the FAA.

The 737 Max series of aircraft were ordered to stop flying more than 15 months ago in the wake of two deadly crashes—Lion Air Flight 610 outside of Jakarta, Indonesia in October of 2018 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in March of 2019. Both flights crashed shortly after takeoff due to a malfunction of the automated flight control system. The Lion Air disaster killed 189 passengers and crew and the Ethiopian crash killed all 157 aboard.

As numerous investigations and reports in the aftermath of the two crashes have shown, the flights crashed as a result of a fatal flaw in the automated Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS).

The test flights come a month after Boeing announced it had resumed production of the 737 Max at its facility in Renton, Washington. The company stopped making its flagship aircraft in January because it was unclear at the time when, or if, the Max 8 would ever again be allowed to fly. This latest move is an indication that Boeing fully expects the FAA to reauthorize the aircraft relatively soon, possibly this year.

To date, no executive who oversaw production of the plane or regulatory official who approved it has been charged, much less prosecuted, for the development,

manufacture and marketing of the deadly plane and the death of 346 passengers and crew on the two flights. Ex-CEO Dennis Muilenburg, who spearheaded the development and production of the 737 Max project, left the company in January of this year with salary, stock options and bonuses totaling \$80.7 million.

The MCAS system was introduced on the Max 8 as a cost-cutting measure to offset the plane’s tendency to stall, a byproduct of the installation of new, larger engines on the half-century-old Boeing 737 chassis. This shortcut was taken as an alternative to designing a new generation of aircraft so as to more quickly bring to market a model to compete with the European-based Airbus for market share and profits, particularly in the expanding Chinese market.

To that end, Boeing marketed its new jet as requiring little additional training for pilots and few additional overhead costs, as compared to its previous iteration of the 737, the Boeing 737 NG. It had delivered hundreds of Max 8s and had thousands more on back order at the time of the grounding.

In the aftermath of the crashes and the grounding of the Max 8—which both Boeing and the FAA initially opposed—a myriad of reports from aviation safety agencies internationally and leaked internal emails from Boeing employees and officials established that the company was well aware of the dangerous flaws in the aircraft, but carried out a cover-up in order to get the plane into the air.

Neither these damning facts nor the coronavirus pandemic have stopped Boeing and the FAA from plowing ahead with their plans to bring the aircraft back into service. Both the corporation and the regulator are more concerned with the value of the company’s stock, which shot up 14.4 percent, to \$194.49 a share, the day the first test flight was

completed. This is more than double the record low to which the stock collapsed in mid-March. The Dow Jones itself shot up 200 points, propelled by Boeing's gains.

The company's stock was initially bolstered by the \$17 billion bailout it received as part of the bipartisan CARES Act corporate rescue package passed at the end of March. The money for Boeing was part of a broader package to inject cash into the aviation industry after air travel collapsed in response to the pandemic.

The massive sums being provided to Boeing sharply contrast with the pittance the corporate giant has provided for the 346 families that lost loved ones in the two crashes. Each family has received a mere \$144,500 per crash victim from an account that is overseen by the notorious Wall Street "fixer" Kenneth Feinberg. He is working to defend the airplane manufacturer's profits and refurbish its public image.

Even as Boeing executives have continued to make millions in salary and stock options, the corporation has slashed at least 12,300 jobs, about half of which are layoffs and half buyouts. According to CEO David Calhoun, the cuts will be focused on Boeing's commercial division, as its defense-related projects have remained profitable. The cuts are a little less than one-tenth of the company's total workforce, and may rise to 16,000 in the near future.

Calhoun, who succeeded Muilenburg in January, claims that the layoffs are the inevitable result of "unprecedented pressure" on the company caused by the pandemic. There were, however, the rumblings in January that layoffs were coming related to the grounding of the Max 8, despite Calhoun's assurances otherwise. The company has lost at least \$20 billion in the Max 8 crisis. The job cuts will save the firm about \$1 billion a year.

This money will no doubt be funneled into executive salaries and the portfolios of big shareholders, many of whom already made a killing in before and after the Max 8 groundings. During the meteoric rise of the company's stock in February 2019, several top company officials sold millions of dollars in stock. These include the president and CEO of Boeing Defense Space & Security, Leanne Caret, who sold \$5.9 million worth of stock, Executive Vice President Ted Colbert (\$2.4 million), Senior Vice President B. Marc Allen (\$2.3 million) and President and CEO of

Boeing Commercial Airplanes Stanley A. Deal (\$2.5 million).

During this same period, these executives rewarded themselves with gifts of stock worth, at their 2019 height, \$3.9 million, \$2.3 million, \$1.7 million and \$4.0 million, respectively. Several other executives have received similar windfalls in the past six months.



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